
Social Media and E-commerce in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – Trends and Future Directions

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ABSTRACT

Social commerce (s-commerce) is a new form of electronic commerce (e-commerce) that uses social media to deliver commerce transactions [9], and can be defined as the use of social media to conduct commercial transactions [10]. S-commerce has empowered customers and enhanced the relationship between companies and their customers. In Saudi Arabia, its use has created business opportunities for both entrepreneurs and companies. However, few studies have investigated the use of s-commerce in the Arab world, particularly in Saudi Arabia, and thus our research aims to examine the current use of s-commerce in Saudi Arabia, via the use of qualitative data collection methods, including interviews and co-design workshops. In this paper, we present certain essential research issues which need to be considered for Saudi Arabia and the Arab world to reach their full potential.

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KEYWORDS

Social media; social networks; e-commerce; social commerce; Saudi female entrepreneurs



Figure 1: Examples of female entrepreneurs' business cards

INTRODUCTION

The aim of our study is to investigate and explore the use of social media in Saudi Arabia. Social media applications and Web 2.0 technology tools have recently been emerging. Every year, there is a massive growth in social media users around the Arab world, with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates being among the top countries in terms of the annual growth of social media users in 2018 [5]. Social media plays a significant role in consumers' daily life activities by enabling them to communicate, share, and buy, and indeed people have started to trade products and services using social media applications (s-commerce) [10]. This has therefore created new business opportunities for entrepreneurs and companies [8].

Instagram is one example of a social media network being used as an s-commerce platform, and it is especially popular in Arabic countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt [9]. Instagram helps consumers to express their opinion and share information with others [8]. A few studies have explored the use of s-commerce in Arabic countries such as Saudi Arabia [1] [2], Kuwait [8], the United Arab Emirates [14], and Egypt [6]. However, there is a need to conduct deeper studies in this area, especially considering that social media applications have started to develop and test new features to enhance user experience in s-commerce. In 2014, Facebook added a new method of buying products through its "shop now" button, which is a "call-to action button" [7], and Instagram followed suit in 2016 [9]. Currently, Instagram is building a standalone shopping application [3]. For these reasons, it is important to understand the current use of s-commerce to be able to develop features within s-commerce platforms, as well as new s-commerce platforms which can satisfy the needs of Arab users.

This study focuses on user behaviour in the context of s-commerce in Saudi Arabia. In support of female entrepreneurs, a yearly exhibition is organised by the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry, represented by the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Centre. Within this exhibition, female entrepreneurs can present their products for free to motivate and encourage their business ideas. Having attended one of these events during our studies, we found that most of the entrepreneurs rely on social media platforms as the only way to display and sell their products. The most common social media applications for these businesses are WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat. Fig. 1, displays samples of female entrepreneurs' business cards showing the most common social media applications. Moreover, these applications are also used by retail and wholesale businesses. Fig. 2 presents two Instagram accounts, one for a female entrepreneur and the other for a superstore in Saudi Arabia. Consumers interact with these accounts by liking, commenting, tagging, and following. They can also access up-to-date information about the new products, sales and offers.

We conducted interviews and co-design workshops with consumers and potential consumers. The most interesting theme that appeared in our research is trust. Moreover, the results are also highly related to social aspects. We plan to analyse the data from the workshop and finalise the design considerations so that social commerce platforms in Saudi Arabia can be enhanced.



Figure 2: Examples of Instagram accounts for both a female entrepreneur and a superstore in Saudi Arabia

After this, a prototype will be developed for Instagram to determine which social features are essential when conducting commercial activities, especially those features which enhance trust. The recommended investigation methods are controlled experiments, usability testing, and interviews [13]. For this reason, we are going to combine interviews with an existing usability questionnaire [11]. This will then lead to future research directions being outlined, as the main contribution of this paper.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Due to the lack of studies in the context of the Human Computer-Interaction (HCI) community in the Arab region, it has emerged that there is a need to focus on and develop this research area with further studies. Academics should shed light on s-commerce by considering it a new research area which requires more investigation and exploration, especially in Saudi Arabia. In the light of our study, we will share recommendations for future HCI research and practice:

- Best practices in HCI research need to be identified and followed when conducting research and designing a user interface (UI) for Saudi users. For example, we faced some difficulties gathering the required number of participants for several reasons, such as cultural norms. For this reason, we used snowball sampling, which is recommended for recruiting participants in Saudi Arabia [12]. However, as some participants mentioned that they would have participated if our study had included online participation, it is essential to investigate both current and optimal methods that suit Saudi users.
- It is also recommended that a deeper understanding is gained of how Saudi people use social media platforms to trade products. By exploring, observing, and analysing their behaviour, researchers will be able to offer in-depth theoretical and practical implications for the design or improvement of appropriate s-commerce platforms for Saudi users. A qualitative approach should be followed to reach deeper insights [4].
- Further research needs to be undertaken to investigate users' preferences for social features, according to their requirements, when designing an s-commerce platform. Design principles within s-commerce platforms must be explored, and those features which enhance trust identified.
- It would be interesting to carry out experiments to test the implementation of social network features into e-commerce websites. Moreover, there is a need to examine the effect of social features on trust.
- We also recommend investigating the motivation and barriers for Saudi users who write and share their reviews regarding purchased products. Furthermore, it is also essential to study how and why other consumers on the same platforms trust each other's reviews.
- Sellers' and buyers' behaviour when using social media platforms to conduct a purchase need to be studied and discussed. As an illustration, a seller presents their product on Instagram, receives buyers' questions and queries on WhatsApp, and shares exclusive offers on Snapchat.

CONCLUSIONS

Research in s-commerce is still in the early stages around the world and especially within Arabic countries. Therefore, deeper studies should be conducted to understand the use of s-commerce, especially focusing on behaviour and design. Finally, it is recommended that best practices are explored by conducting exploratory studies in the Arab World.

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